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CHAPTER X

Children

BIRTH

842 Every Arab woman's greatest desire in life is to have a child. She is brought up with this idea from childhood. The natural desire to become a mother is reinforced by the reproach attached to childlessness and by a woman's knowledge that she will be divorced if she does not produce a son and heir for her husband.

842 791 If she does not conceive soon after marriage, she often resorts to various herb concoctions made from the grasses of the field, and drinks these: frequently with ill result. The "wise" old women of every tribe are adepts in compounding draughts to stimulate fertility and also in preparing of "love philtres", for those who need them. They also claim to be able to interpret dreams. Most old women go in for this form of helping their younger sisters.

791 Fortune-telling is not uncommonly also practised by these old cronies, though in Wahhabi land it is considered sinful and is not openly pursued.

844 The average girl's strength at the birth of her first and subsequent children is quite phenomenal. I knew of a Mutairi girl, for instance, who came into hospital at Kuwait one evening to have her baby. The child was born at 2 a.m. and two hours later the girl wrapped up her child, slung it over her back, and in the momentary absence of the lady doctor, departed on foot to her people camped twenty miles away.

Among the shepherd tribes of Iraq women produce children while the tribe is on the march. Migration, of course, cannot stop. The woman drops behind, has her baby, at times with only one woman to assist her, and after washing it herself in clean sand, picks it up and follows the tribe. She knows she will be left behind, perhaps to die, unless she keeps up with the others. The recognised birth congratulation formula is *mubdrakin fi hal maulud al Sa'aid.*

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CHAPTER XXIV

Dreams and their Interpretation

The Badawin pays at all times great attention to dreams, and he will solemnly take any unusual dream to the local interpreter, be it woman or man, to ask its meaning. As an example, see the dream of Shagha, mother of Faisal al Duwish, in Chapter XXII (p. 281). The interpreters of dreams are mostly old women skilled in herbs, midwifery, sickness, in witchcraft and the various methods for averting the Evil Eye.

There are, of course, men interpreters of dreams as well, the most famous probably being the man employed for many years for this purpose by H.M. the King of Sa'udi Arabia, Shaikh 'Abdul 'Aziz Al Nimr* by name. I am told by the Shaikh of Kuwait that no dream of the King's was allowed to pass without this man's being consulted.

According to the Arab, the interpretation of dreams usually goes by opposites. That is to say, if something untoward happens to the dreamer, the dream is of good omen.

To dream of killing snakes nearly always means that a man will triumph over his enemies, and to dream of quenching a fire is equally propitious. A "dagger" stands for a "woman", a "sword" for a "man", and so on.

Some persons are recognised as having a special gift for dreaming prophetic dreams, and such persons always command respect and attention when recounting their dreams.

I myself was not a little fortunate in that three very vivid dreams of mine in Kuwait, which I was careful to tell beforehand to several persons, including the shaikh, came more or less true after they had been interpreted by a certain Um Mubarak, a local Badawin woman wise in this form of knowledge.

I quote the dreams in question purely as an example of how the interpretation was handled.

* It is uncertain if he is alive to-day, but if dead he will certainly have had a successor.